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AUTHOR Larsen-Pusey, Mary Ann; Park, Cynthia Darche
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ABSTRACT

Research into language acquisition is reviewed and implications for practice are discussed. The research stemmed from the State of California's mandate to use specific oral language instruments for identifying students who are limited English speakers. The development of a test to identify and place English as a second language students in appropriate classes is discussed. This test was also designed to give the teacher useful diagnostic information. The design and statistical analysis of the grammar portion of this test is highlighted. Empirical evidence supporting a developmental rationale for the acquisition of grammatical proficiency in school settings is evaluated. It is shown that the language learner is an active participant in the learning process and uses three psychological strategies (simplification/reduction, generalization/expansion, and differentiation/distinction) to move along a continuum of language performance. In addition, the acquisition process is integrative; that is, the learner is not acquiring the negative in isolation of other inflections. A properly constructed test permits a teacher to look at the incorrect choices students make across a number of structures and thus to gain a good indication of their stage of acquisition and the types of structures they are acquiring. (RW)

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WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Mary Ann Larsen-Pusey
Language Assessment Specialist
Sweetwater Union High School District
1130 Fifth Avenue
Chula Vista, California 92011

Cynthia Darché Park
Associate Professor Department of Education
San Diego State University
San Diego, California

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Mary Ann Larsen-Pusey
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AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Introduction:

When this research project started, my co-author and I were primarily concerned with the practical issues and constraints of language proficiency testing among limited English speakers. We were also concerned, however, with the theoretical issues involved in testing communicative proficiency. In the next part of this paper I will deal with the practical and the theoretical issues as we see them in terms of reliability and validity. I will then spend some time discussing the evidence from the literature on language acquisition to support our choice of both content and format.

The Practical Issues:

The state of California prescribes the use of specific oral language instruments for identifying students who are limited English speakers. At the secondary level these are the BSM II and the LAS II. Since neither of these tests yields enough data to appropriately place students in ESL classes, most schools resort to other tests to determine if the student is at the beginning, intermediate or advanced level of ESL. These tests may be developed by a district to accompany a "language continuum" or be a test accompanying a series of textbooks in use by the district. Or the district may use some other more traditional grammar test such as the one by Donna Ilyin. Usually these tests are paper and pencil, multiple choice tests measuring subject-verb agreement, pronoun case and other grammatical features taught in ESL classes. In my district the LAS testing is followed by such a paper and pencil test as well as a writing sample to place the student at the appropriate level of ESL.

The practical concerns of the prescribed oral interview arise from the large numbers of students entering my district who may be limited English-speaking. During this past fall semester, the Language Assessment Center recorded the testing of 2042 students during the period of time between September 1 and December 31. In the first week of school alone, we tested 962 students. Excluding that first week, we tested an average of 16 students per day for an approximate cost of $380 weekly for testing. Trained testers report spending approximately 50 minutes per student on the average to establish rapport, administer the LAS II and then transcribe the story-retelling task. For our daily average of 16 students, over 13 man hours are spent in oral language testing. Even if we were to count only the ideal 30 minutes the test publishers suggest, it would take over 8 hours to test our 16 students. This does not include any other testing done for ESL placement.

We therefore concluded that for practical purposes at the secondary level, it would be more cost effective and reliable to use a paper and pencil test based on comprehension rather than on production type responses.

Theoretical Issues:

We also addressed the theoretical issues of concern in constructing a test of this kind. We wished to design a test useful for both identification and appropriate ESL placement but which would also give teachers useful diagnostic information. To attain predictive validity we thought such a test should contain sections reflecting: 1) grammatical proficiency (syntax and morphology), 2) discourse capabilities (reading comprehension, vocabulary and writing a paragraph) 3) sociolinguistic proficiency (listening comprehension in specified contexts) and 4) a short interview to determine productive skills.

This paper focuses on the design and statistical analysis of the grammar portion of the test. We will discuss empirical evidence supporting a developmental rationale for the acquisition of grammatical proficiency in school settings and report statistics supporting the possible existence of such a rationale.

We propose a theory of grammatical competence built upon the notion that language acquisition is developmental rather than linear. In L_1 research the use of the term "developmental" has usually implied progression in the acquisition of grammar based on maturational considerations. In L_2 research the term "developmental" is used, but usually refers to the fact that learners pass through certain stages or sequences in acquiring a second language, and that these stages are sometimes marked by "nongrammatical" performances. For purposes of our research we choose to use the term as used in L_2 research.

We propose, then that that aspect of communicative competence called grammatical linguistic competence, is developmental but not linear. It is developmental in that each new piece of knowledge is added to that already known or possessed. It is not linear in the sense that the acquisition of a new piece of knowledge may in fact affect in predictable ways what seemed to be already acquired. Through this process students may appear at a particular stage to have lost ground in the attainment of grammatical proficiency.

Most tests are written and scored based on the assumption that proficiency is acquired linearly. Proficiency is determined on the basis of a total score which represents the summation of several randomly selected items. This score may remain static for a period of time in spite of instruction. In this case, the student would appear to be making no growth in his language proficiency. In fact, s/he might seem to show a decline.

Yet, on the other hand his/her movement along the interlanguage continuum may be noticeable to the trained ESL teacher. Predictive validity for proper placement might be better attained by considering not only the total score, but also by looking at how the students react to specific items written to reflect developmental sequences of language acquisition.

Reliability and Validity Issues:

Present oral productive tests as used in school situations have questionable reliability because of problems related to production and judging productive proficiency. The first problem is the issue of subjectivity on the part of the rater and the difficulty in attaining inter-rater reliability. In school situations inter-rater reliability is impractical to obtain. Without inter-rater reliability, it is not possible to achieve high reliability coefficients for the test itself. Inter-rater reliability is further complicated because of the effect on the rater of different dialects. Because the rater's subjective feelings toward a given dialect may affect his judgement, the student's underlying linguistic competence is often not being judged so much as is his capability to produce the desired dialect. The second issue is that of the effect of errors. The question becomes to what extent they are due to performance slips or to what extent they are due to a lack of proficiency. The third issue relates to the length of the test. Because of time constraints, one-to-one oral production tests are limited as to the number of structures sampled and the total number of items (Rosansky, 1976). This constraint lowers reliability. The selection of a multiple choice method to test the language proficiency of adolescents and adults with some reading capacity avoids these problems.

It has been amply demonstrated that multiple choice grammar tests used with literate students demonstrate high internal consistency reliability

coefficients. Because scoring is objective, we overcome the problem of inter-rater reliability. Because the student is using a passive skill -- comprehension -- we overcome the problem of production slips. Because the method allows for group testing, we also overcome the problem of limited item sampling.

In this presentation we will be making a case for what is a reliable and practical way to measure grammatical proficiency. We also wish to examine the test's validity not only as a predictive instrument, but also as one which demonstrates the developmental sequence of language learning.

Predictive validity should be defined in terms of what we are trying to predict. In school settings, this is not necessarily how a child will score on some other test, but how well he/she will be able to function and achieve in the all-English classroom. Courses in secondary schools do not usually require any substantial amount of oral language production on the part of students. Such classes do require both aural and reading comprehension and writing tasks. Students' success on these tasks is probably more dependent on their underlying grammatical competence than on oral production skills.

Let us now deal with construct validity. Using a multi-method, multi-trait design, Bachman and Palmer's (1982), factor analysis showed that multiple choice responses consistently load more heavily on specific trait factors than on method factors making multiple choice formats a more valid method for measuring grammatical competence as a trait than either oral interview responses or writing samples.

The remaining issue regarding validity which must be addressed is content validity. Usually content validity is based on the judgement of experts in the field about how well the items sampled reflect the universe of knowledges/skills being tested. Farhady (1982) comments in this regard

that few language proficiency tests written to assess adult foreign students are based on a systematic selection of content derived from well-planned tables of specification.

The California State Department of Education in their technical reports (1981) judged the BSM weak in terms of content and construct validity. Rosansky (1979) questioned it in terms of inter-scorer reliability. She also (1976) questions the validity of the BSM on two counts:

1. The test is limited in terms of content -- the sequence of eight grammatical morphemes, and
2. elicited language may not yield the same data as spontaneous production.

She based the latter concern on her own limited study comparing the correlations between longitudinal production data from a subject with that same subject's BSM-elicited production data at the same point in time. Her study did not yield a high correlation.

In writing the first draft of the test we strove to achieve content validity not only with respect to the sampling of items, but also with respect to the second language learning environment immigrant students potentially have available to them. That is, immigrant students are learning English not only through formalized ESL instruction, but also, to varying degrees, through interaction in an English-speaking society. This implies that the process of second language learning may be potentially more like that of those learning exclusively in a naturalistic setting than like those learning exclusively in a formalized setting. Given these assumptions, it seemed logical to base our table of specifications not only on types of grammatical constructions, but also on documented "errors" produced by language learners as they progress through various stages of language acquisition.

The preceding comments have implications for the process of test construction contrary to the views of those who look at reliability and validity, both predictive and construct, as a purely empirical question. Our underlying assumption is that attainment of high statistical correlation or favorable factor loadings are only meaningful if a test has been constructed on a sound practical and theoretical basis. Such considerations have included:

1. the purposes for which the test results will be used;
2. the purposes for which the targeted population will most likely use the language;
3. the targeted population's potential learning environment; and
4. the psychological processes and strategies this population will most likely employ.

The choices one makes when considering these issues have an impact on the content validity of the test. The assumption here is that statistically determined validity can only be interpreted on the basis of the nature of the content validity of the test (Cziko, unpublished 1982).

We have looked at the first three points in some detail earlier in this presentation. However, I may need to elaborate as to the implications of point four above. In being concerned about the psychological processes the population would likely employ in responding to items, we have designed these items in direct opposition to precepts held by pioneers in the language testing movement who were adherents of the audio-lingual approach. We have done this on the following 3 premises:

1. Because language acquisition is developmental, we have purposely used distractors which reflect the common "errors" made during the acquisition process. This practice is contrary to that espoused by the behaviorists who hold that exposing students to

errors only serves to reinforce an incorrect response. We, on the other hand, hold that the acquisition of grammatical competence is what allows the student to recognize an "error" as being ungrammatical.

2. The use of developmental "errors" in distractors allows for variably weighting the items so the student can be given credit for his level of grammatical progress. This technique is contrary to the linear nature of language learning underlying virtually all tests of proficiency.
3. The process of language acquisition is not only developmental, it is also integrative. That is, the student is not learning one grammatical feature in isolation from all others. This implies that the selection of structures must be extensive and that each item instead of being discrete, may test more than one grammatical feature at a time.

Evidence From The Literature:

Now let us take a look at the literature. Because the "what" of second language acquisition in naturalistic settings has been shown to be similar to that of first language acquisition in some respects, it seemed reasonable to compare studies investigating these two learning processes. In addition, studies examining the "how" of second language acquisition seemed to compare favorably with processes hypothesized in both first language acquisition and pidginization and second language studies. Because a knowledge of process could guide us in the selection of items and distractors, the literature on both first and second language acquisition processes was also scrutinized.

Processes:

The research in first language acquisition supported our selection of Comprehension as the most appropriate task to test grammatical competence.

Various performance tasks have been used as measures of an underlying proficiency or competence. These are Imitation, Comprehension and Production. Generally speaking, in Imitation the subject is asked to imitate what he has heard from the examiner or researcher. In Comprehension the subject must demonstrate at a passive/receptive level through some action that s/he has understood the cue given him/her by the examiner or researcher. Production, ideally, requires the subject to verbally respond in a creative and spontaneous manner to verbal or visual stimulii at an active production level. Interpretation of the relationship between production and comprehension has been difficult because of the varying ways production has been defined across studies.

Researchers in first language acquisition have looked at these performances as learning processes. Fraser, Bellugi and Brown (1963) examined these processes of language acquisition in small children. Their findings that Imitation is greater than Comprehension is greater than Production may be due in part to what they used as production. In that study the subject heard the sentences corresponding to a picture. The child was then asked a question about the picture. He replied by using one of the sentences he had heard previously. Production, in this case, was not truly spontaneous or creative on the part of the subject.

The findings of other researchers have not always supported the Fraser, Bellugi and Brown order of I > C > P. Chomsky (1969), Bloom (1971) and C. Park (1972), using more spontaneous forms of production, all found that children were able to produce grammatical contrasts they did not fully comprehend. At this point it seems reasonable to say that whether Production in the spontaneous sense is greater than comprehension or whether comprehension is greater than production needs to be further investigated. Indications from these studies are that in some way the development of

semantic knowledge acts as a basis for developing full syntactic comprehension and then production. In other words, the development of syntactic competence is neither an all or none phenomenon nor is it isolated from other levels of language knowledge.

This, together with Rosansky's findings on elicited production mentioned earlier, implies that just because a student can produce a grammatical form in an elicited manner does not necessarily mean he fully understands its grammatical meaning or that he would produce that form in a more spontaneous situation. Thus, the assumptions underlying the use of elicited production as measures of grammatical competence may be unwarranted.

Strategies:

We hold that learner strategies must also be reflected in the content selection. The nature of these strategies has been inferred through an analysis of the "what" of language acquisition.

Results of both longitudinal and cross-sectional language acquisition studies have shown us ways to write distractors as well as select structures which reflect both learner strategies and stages of development. Studies have been adequate to guide us in the construction of items tapping grammatical morphemes and certain syntactic structures such as the interrogative and the negative. The literature is wanting, particularly in second language acquisition research, in areas such as modals, conjuncts, embeddings and subordinates. Thus, for the construction of items tapping these structures, we relied on our intuition and classroom experience.

HANDOUT #1

Handout #1 shows the table of specifications for the first version of our test. Notice that the items reflect a variety of structures including those not well investigated in the literature. (Through item analysis we hope to refine these items.)

Both first and second language research has shown that certain structures appear before others in a learner's speech. The rate of acquisition

HANDOUT #1

Table

SPECIFICATIONS OF SYNTACTIC STRUCTURES

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	50
Word order												x							x	x	x																														
adj + n																		x																																
adv - freq	x																																																	
Negative		x		x			x							x																																				
Interrog																																																		
yes-no			x	x		x		x				x																																					
where																											x																						
what															x																																			
how									x																																								
who																										x			x																				
whose																																																	
tag																						x																											
Imperative					x																																												
Emphatic																																																	
Adverb phrase																																			x					x								
time									x				x																																				
purpose																																																	
Embedding																							x					x		x																				
Aux. verbs																																																	
have												x																																					
do			x	x				x																										x														
may																															x																	
can/could																									x											x												
must/have to																																x	x															
Request																								x										x														
Dummy subject																																																	
it																	x																																
there																																							x										
Passive																																								x									
Tenses																																																	
present	x	x	x	x										x		x		x							x		x		x		x			x		x	x						x				x		
past						x	x	x			x								x	x						x		x					x											x	x	x		x
perfect									x			x																																					
future															x							x								x																			

may vary but the sequence is similar for both first and second language learners. Menyuk (1977) contends that some structures must be internalized before others appear.

In examining the surface manifestations of the acquisition of these structures, both first and second language researchers offer evidence that certain strategies are applied and that these too come in a specific order: reduction or simplification precedes generalization and expansion, which in turn precedes differentiation and distinction (Berko, 1958; Bloom, 1970; Brown, 1973; Ervin-Tripp, 1973; Cancino, et.al., 1978; Stauble, 1978).

The process of reduction/simplification has been shown in both first and second language acquisition research. Brown and Fraser (1963) examined the language of very young children and observed that their output consisted almost entirely of content words -- nouns, verbs, adjectives. They termed this stage "telegraphic language" since adults resort to this reduction strategy when constraints or doubts about the linguistic competence of the interlocator -- child, foreigner, etc. of time and money so mandate. Other researchers in first language acquisition (Bloom, 1970; Klima & Bellugi, 1966; Bowermann, 1973) confirmed the telegraphic stage in early child language performance.

The same strategy of reduction/simplification has been observed in the interlanguage performance (Selinker, 1972) of second language learners. Richards (1972), in discussing interlanguage, proposed that the reduction seen in second language acquisition was similar to that seen in the performance of speakers of pidgin language. Other researchers have confirmed that in the early stages of second language acquisition, the predominant strategy used by the speaker is one of reduction/simplification (Cazden, et. al., 1975; Schumann, 1975, 1976, 1982; Stauble, 1978; Kitch, 1982).

After the telegraphic stage where reduction is the predominant mental process or strategy, a second stage appears where one of generalization predominates leading to expansion in the speech performance. This has been reported in both the first and second language research. Berko (1958)

confirmed this process in first language acquisition in her classic study of the application of the rules of morphology to nonsense words by children ranging in age from 5½ to 7.

Not only does the learner generalize, he overgeneralizes. This tendency has been observed in the spontaneous speech performance "errors" of children and reported by Klima and Bellugi, (1966); Bloom, (1970); Brown and Hanlon, (1970).

In Bloom's (1970) study of spontaneous speech, she reported that the children overgeneralized by adding inflections where they did not fit semantically or syntactically, such as mines (p. 231).

Further evidence of overgeneralization on the part of the three-year old child acquiring his first language was reported by Brown and Hanlon (1970). They found that when using tag questions, the child first applied the positive tag, "are you?" in both situations (You're not going, are you?" as well as, "You're going, are you?"), evidencing acquisition of the rule requiring duplication of the main auxiliary in the tag, but noncontrol of the rule requiring the negative/positive switch.

In second language acquisition, Andersen (1979) took Schumann's (1974) and Richards' (1975) pidgnization theories and suggested that the phase where simplification as a strategy gave way to generalization and expansion was similar to depidginization. Schumann's (1975, 1976) studies, and those of Cazden et.al. (1975), Stauble (1978), and Kitch (1982) show that the second stage of spontaneous production in untutored speakers of English is one of adding functor words. This process seems to be the result of a psychological strategy of generalization based on input from the target language. The learner makes errors by adding /s/ to already plural forms to produce childrens or mens. She/he makes irregular verbs regular, thus producing goed or runned instead of went or ran.

Some of the work done on the interrogative and reported in the study by Cancino, et. al. (1978), showed that the tendency to overgeneralize was present in that learners tended to over-apply the inversion rule in indirect questions where it does not apply.

The third process observed in both first and second language acquisition research is that of differentiation and distinction at morphological, semantic and syntactic levels. In the upper stages of the child's acquisition of language, the surface structure for the most part appears to match that of the adult native speaker.

Brown (1973) points out that as the child progresses in his/her language development, she/he begins to distinguish and produce the differences in usage of definite and indefinite articles.

Cazden et. al. (1975) propose that only at the later stages of the learner's acquisition of the interrogative does she/he distinguish and differentiate between the direct and indirect question by inverting appropriately. Schumann (1975, 1976) and Stauble (1978) show that only in the later stages of the acquisition of negation does the learner differentiate and distinguish the uses of the auxiliary as carrier of both tense and number.

The studies cited in this section have shown that the language learner is an active participant in the process and uses three psychological strategies (simplification/reduction, generalization/expansion, and differentiation/distinction) to move along a continuum of language performance which appears more and more like the model of the target language. The acquisition process is integrative; that is, the learner is not acquiring the negative in isolation of other inflections. Nor does he/she acquire syntax separately from semantic meaning.

We have constructed item distractors which reflect these strategies. Some examples will be given in the following section.

Suggested Formats and Strategies:

This pair of items shows the process used in constructing the distractors. If you will look at Handout #2, you will find the stages of second language acquisition of the negative as outlined by Stauble (1978). Handout #3 shows the stages Cancino, et. al. (1978) suggested for the acquisition of the interrogative. In handouts #4 and #5 there are sample items based on these stages. In these examples the four distractors are ranked hierarchically from first stage "error" (1) to target response (4). In the test, the distractors were randomly ordered. The scoring based on this hierarchy allowed us to variably weight the responses giving credit to the learner for the level of competence s/he has achieved.

The first field testing of the grammar multiple choice test was administered to 216 ESL students in the Sweetwater Union High School District ranging from junior high through senior high age range: 40% were level I students, 25% were classified as level II students and 35% were level III students. Distractors were weighted in the following manner:

3 points for the target response
2 points for a stage III response
1 point for a stage II response
0 points for a stage I response

All responses were coded using this scale. A Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient was figured using this weighted scale. It equaled .96. This means that the test as a whole measures the same thing.

Then the responses to each item were analyzed by counting the frequencies given to each distractor. As an example, look at the analysis of test item #12 where students were asked to recognize the correct question. Notice that the highest ranked response, distractor (a), received 36.6% of the total responses. This is congruent with the 35% classified as level III students. Notice also that the 2nd ranked distractor (b) showed a 43.1% response rate. The frequencies for the last two distractors were combined, but show the smallest response rate was given to those items weighted as 1 or 0.

HANDOUT #2

STAGES OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NEGATIVE
IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION
(Adapted from Stauble, 1978)

Stage I: Pre Verbal Negation. (telegraphic stage)

1. NO plus any verb constructions: I no eat
   No eat that!
2. NO plus phrase constructions: No in Colombia
   (He isn't/wasn't in Colombia.)

Stage II: Pre Verbal and Post Verbal Negation

1. Dominant use of unanalyzed don't/doesn't:
   I don't saw him (I didn't see him.)
   We don't are(n't) in the same school. (We are not in the same school.)
2. Some Cop/Aux plus Negator
   The dog can't bark.
   But she isn't cleaning the house.
3. NO/NOT plus phrase constructions in variation
   No this week. (Not this week)
   Not today.

1. Decline of NO plus any verb constructions:
   (I no eat --- I not eat)
2. Expansion of Cop/Aux plus negator constructions:
   I will don't see you tomorrow. (I will not see you tomorrow.)
   I'm not old enough.
   Can no rain. (It cannot rain)
3. NOT plus phrase domination:
   Not this week

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HANDOUT #3

STAGES OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE WH-QUESTION IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

(Adapted from Cazden, Cancino, Rosansky and Schumann, 1975)

Stage I: Undifferentiation: Learner did not distinguish between simple and embedded wh-questions.

1. Uninverted: both simple and embedded wh-questions were uninverted.

   Simple: What you study?

   Embedded: That's what I do with my pillow.

2. Variable inversion: simple wh-questions were sometimes inverted, sometimes not.

   Inverted: How can you say it?

   Uninverted: Where you get that?

3. Generalization: increasing inversion in wh-questions with inversion being extended to embedded questions.

   Simple: How can I kiss her if I don't even know her name?

   Embedded: I know where are you going.

Stage II: Differentiation: Learner distinguished between simple and embedded wh-questions.

Simple: Where do you live?

Embedded: I don't know what he had.

Stage III: Loss of Pre Verbal Negation Establishment of English Post Verbal Negation Rule

1. Present/past tense distrinction among negative forms.
   I didn't went to Colombia. (I didn't go to Colombia.)
   He wasn't talking to the teacher.
   We didn't saw it. (We didn't see it.)
2. Elimination of non-standard negators.
3. Restructuring of unanalyzed negative forms.
   They didn't see nobody. (They didn't see anybody)
   I didn't see it all.
4. Standard use of DO auxiliary as carrier of tense and negation.

HANDOUT #4

Choose the correct sentence:

1. I no go school Friday.
2. I not go school last Friday.
3. I didn't went to school last Friday.
4. I didn't go to school last Friday.

Answer this question - Did you get the book?

1. No get book.
2. Not book.
3. Don't get book.
4. Not this time.

Answer this question - Do you want ice cream?

1. No ice cream.
2. I not want ice cream.
3. I don't aren't like ice cream
4. I don't like ice cream.

Tell me not to eat fish.

1. No fish.
2. No eat fish.
3. Not eat fish.
4. Don't eat fish!

HANDOUT #5

Combine these two sentences into one:
What time is it? - Can you tell me?

1. What time it is?
2. What time is it? Tell me.
3. Can you tell me what is it?
4. Can you tell me what time it is?

One of these is a correct question.

1. What you doing?
2. What do you doing?
3. What you are doing?
4. What are you doing?

I went yesterday. . . . . Ask the question:

1. When you go?
2. When you went?
3. When did you went?
4. When did you go?

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Item #23 displays a similar frequency distribution pattern. Students were required here to recognize the correct form of the verb to be used after the preposition in. The highest weighted distractor (c) received 32.4% of the responses -- which favorably compares with the percentage of students classified as level III. The distractor ranked next received 45.4% of the responses a number too large to be explained by chance alone. The frequencies for the two lowest ranked items were combined to produce 21.8% of the responses.

Both of these items show congruence between the weightings assigned and preferences made by students depending on whether they were classified as level III or as non level III. The preponderance of preference for distractors weighted as a 2 shows that this pattern of responses cannot be explained by chance alone.

Thus for these two items there is evidence that students are recognizing "correct" responses based on some level of capability and not on chance alone.

In contrast item #17 showed a pattern of responses not congruent with the researchers' weighting schemes. This item was easier than the other two in that 47.7% of the students chose the correct answer. Only 3.5% chose (c) which we believed to be the response closest to target. Distractors b and d, which look very much alike, were similarly responded to and their frequencies were combined (20.8%). This item shows that the distractors were probably not well constructed. In fact, there is little data available to us on the longitudinal development for second language speakers of the dummy subject It as it relates to there is/there are. Such an item must be either discarded or rewritten.

We found when we could weight distractors on the basis of documented stages of interlanguage performance we had a better chance of obtaining a frequency profile similar to those shown for the first two examples.

However, for those distractors we had to design or weight on our intuition, the results were more similar to the third frequency profile shown. These data have not only helped us revise many of our items, but have also convinced us of the merit of this approach.

Until we can come up with items which are similar in frequency profile to the first two shown, it makes no sense to hierarchically order the items among themselves. For the last item, for example, a larger number of students may have chosen the "correct" answer simply because none of the other distractors tapped into an appropriate stage for that structure. Thus it would be incorrect for us to say that the dummy It is acquired before the question inversion using an auxiliary verb.

With properly constructed items teachers may look at the incorrect choices students make across a number of structures and get a good indication of their stage of acquisition and the types of structures they are close to acquiring. Such diagnostic information could be invaluable for grouping and selection of grammatical content to be taught.

Unresolved Issues:

In closing, I would like to raise a number of issues that I think are still unresolved and should be researched.

As I mentioned, we are uncertain how to interpret the total score on the basis of the variably weighting of items. Further, we are not sure which measurement models are most applicable. For example, would a Guttman scale be appropriate? In addition, in terms of developmental stages across language traits, we do not have good information from basic research as to stages of pragmatic or sociolinguistic competence.

TABULATION OF PREFERENCES
FOR TEST ITEM DISTRACTORS

ITEM 12 N = 216

	RANKING 1	2	3
One of these is a correct question:			
a) Was John washing his hands?			36.6%
b) Did John was washing his hands?		43.1%	
c) John were washing his hands?	20.4%		
d) His hands John was washing?			

ITEM 23 N = 216

	RANKING 1	2	3
They are interested in _____ your book.			
a) to read	21,8%		
b) have read			
c) reading			32.4%
d) read		45.4%	

ITEM 17 N = 216

	RANKING 1	2	3
Choose the correct sentence:			
a) It's a long way to Chicago.			47.7%
b) There are a long way to Chicago. (with "d")			
c) There is a long way to Chicago.		3.5%	
d) They are a long way to Chicago.	20.8%		

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